

Falling Home



An anthology for Advent and beyond

John Roff

Other anthologies by John Roff

Opening the door

Travel by word

With the Earth

A pocketful of pins

Observations

Heading North

Creativity

Image of God
m unfolding e

We are sacred because we have been born.

John Philip Newell

Foreword

Hello. I invite you to join me today on a journey into beauty. As time turns, and the seasons of life offer their richness to our experience, there wells up in me a growing sense of our joint createdness; one earth community, held, cherished and loved by a powerful Mystery who grows greater and more beautiful the deeper we investigate.

I am in love with God, to put it another way, though words can only vaguely hint at what this means, and I cheerfully align myself with mystics through the ages who prize intimate union with the Divine above all else.

Advent is a precious season, a sacred anticipation of treasure deeper than ourselves. At this particular time of year, then, I want to share this anthology with you. It is a collection of poems that, to paraphrase my wise editor Heather Johnston, 'hold truths that are dear to me', 'words to help you get hold of the detail of your own journey'.

I invite you to not only read this book, but to use it - and I pray that through it you may be drawn to Hope and Presence, in any season of waiting.

Thanks

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Two meditations on a Protea flower

Beneath, surrounded

First, the ridiculous exuberance -
leaves, bracts,
nectar, colour,
sunbirds, sugarbirds,
beetles,
riot
pollination invitation madness -
that is an open Protea flower,

Second, those waiting hidden seeds
gripped tight
the wooded case so strong
that fifteen years or more may pass
and still the seeds lie dormant,
waiting;

Fire! No!
all structure, standing, safety, stripped,
that iron tomb ripped open by the agony of open flame, aahhh

look! mystery!
on a soft breeze, over cool ash, the seeds fly free,
all hope and lightness,
into the clear space of many open acres.

And you may not believe it but,
there - revealed, inscribed,
and indeed all that's left behind -
tight spirals at the opened centre,
a deeply ordered pattern
that was hidden in the heart.

Within, unfolding

Around the firmly ordered velvet bud
so thick with promise,
a circlet ring of petal servant hands,
all wave in admiration;

sometimes
a grace is given
such that
you,
we,
all,
may pause
and gaze
in open wonder
at our own true heart.

Voices on Palm Sunday

I am the branch,
on the uncluttered dome of blue above Jerusalem,
a curl of dark hair has just twined between my leaves
and all at once

I want to fly.

I am the stone,
millennia of pilgrim feet have trod me down,
a heavy colt just nudged me with his hoof
and suddenly

I want to sing.

Stillness

Beside the Pond,
grasping.
Swift sweet scales slip
through
fumbling fingers.

Now, I shall wait,

and let You leap

within my heart.

Wilderness trail

Dear God,
as my feet feel again
the swift familiarity,
these well-walked lines
through lonely landscapes,
the sacred comfortableness of
this step,
this rock,
this particular broken branch,

though I have never trodden here before,

I know this place,
I always have,
I never want to leave,
I never can,
each time I loosely depart, stricken,
carrying greater wilderness inside.

Seeing more

SHe

We

three

plural dancing

trialogue

creating grace

Praise-rain

her name
a million million voices
endless as
every drop of
water on
every earth in
every galaxy
echoing his handwork back
an endless woven cycle

his name
she pours down
abundant showers
waters the earth
a liquid flute whose music
ripples out from tears and hopes
baptising music and all water
an irrigation of the soul, returning

Encountering a crocodile on the Black uMfolozi river

I was told they were there,
hidden where the muddied coffee deepens
under banks and cliffs along the river's jagged edges,
but so unprepared for sudden chilling magnetism -
that first clear glimpse,
just snout and eyes,
emerging lightly from opaque silk-silt water,
a subtle easing closer to the bank.

There Is No Hurry Here,
jagged ranks of rigid tiles
emerging from,
and yet one with,
the murky mystery,
the gradual heaving of a ton of hungry time.

Come, wrap your mind's frail arms around
the rounded bulk of this gargantuan tick,
pressed down on soft sand skin and
slowly draining out your hubris.

The Noticing,
a quick unblinking cold regard,
the turn and wheel, swift slide,
the silent sinful sink
back into cool concealment,
a little swirl,
a lick of foam,
the silken lair.

Falling home

Gently tossed
from the deep palm
of a giant hand,
and landing
in soft sand
between the toes
of a pilgrim
bent to help
His wandering stragglers
home,
I am a small
contented
stone.

And,
safe within
these soft securities,
the unencumbered soul
is free to fly.

Autumn

Each year turns my face a little
closer to the burning sun whose
fire takes all dead wood

Grey hairs are shoots that
Wisdom blooms as youth departs
and gold leaves drift to green

Soon I will be clean
full-naked to the coming day
all false growth consumed.

First home

Why do we spend
the rest of our ex-wombed lives
looking for ways back in,
simultaneously fearing
Her deep dark mystery.

This is much deeper than spaces between legs,
it is the space within hearts,
identity in surroundedness,
being covered, tight, snug, home.

Lichen

Slow,
subtle,
silent,
decades
just to colour,
with intent,
one quiet little corner
of a rock.

What is She painting
on the dry stone wall
around your heart?

Jumping to conclusions

The God of my assumptions
has not provided for my needs
in the way that I require,
therefore I must conclude that
that God does not exist.

A cup

A cup slips through my fingers
to the living room floor
shatters
fragments blast out
from ground zero
scattered
silent
and suddenly
this ground is no longer safe for walking.

Gingerly we try to pick it piece by piece
each hopeless fragment of the whole
awkward angular chunks
dig deep into my palm
quick ceramic slices
stab in-between my fingers
naked to the bone
thousands of other pieces everywhere,
confirming the futility of repair.

There is an eternity of work
here,
this one impossible cup.

We took it,
all that we could find,
a grinding bag of brokenness;

down a hidden lane
to a lady in a china shop,
with all the time in the smiling world,
and a strange profusion of roses in her hair,
what do you think emerged?

*(The Japanese have given it a word, Kintsugi,
highlighting the brokenness of broken things
by gilding them, and showing off the cracks,
the under-places; the gold within the breaks
illuminates, it makes the whole.)*

Going gently

It was a clear December morning,
Knight had been ill for weeks,
listless in the shaded kennel-sand
beside the house,
relaxing when we stroked
her gloss-black coat
across those hollow ribs.

That dawn we strolled around the block,
she stayed, resting, in the usual place,
too drawn to move.

On our return,
she was not there,
a hurried searching, calling
"Knight" around the garden,
heard a fading fraction of a bark,
There
sitting where she must have watched our stroll,
her breathing laboured as a slowing wheel;

I picked her up then,
to take her back to bed,
she seemed to change,
here in the cradle of my arms,
stiffening, relaxing?
I'm not sure -
a shift, though, and
by the time I'd knelt to
lay her stillness
on the path,
the light had come,
the message clear,
the waiting done.

Beyond the ground

Here at our feet
among the first discarded leaves
that speak of Autumn, a little bird,
with feathers still outgrowing,

has fallen
like a star.

Across our earth, at any time,
a thousand little feathered stars are falling,
a rain of little deaths,
across the great infinities of space,
always somewhere a star is dying,
so many that it numbs the heart
to care for every one.

But come with me to feel
this one warm grave here in your hand,
the weight of one unrepeatably life
at once both featherlight and heavier than an earth,

then gaze on out at every star
in every eye of every unrepeatably creation
and say that there is
any place or
any thing, or
any one,
that does not matter.

In the car park at the mall during a thunderstorm in Advent

Scooting under cover
through the tinsel rain,
a willing victim of
this season's predatory advertising
heaves a shopping trolley
laden to the brim with emptiness.

Above us, in the pregnant sky,
live lightning fills the clouds
with promise;
in every swelling raindrop
brims a star of hope.

Hope

Eternity is a sky,
always I gaze upward,
longing for the kiss of rain.

God at home

'Your fresh body

- each nail, cell, movement, synapse,
gland, ligament, wrinkle, sneeze -

is the holy shape I freely give and choose
for my immortal heart to dwell,
to fully and completely occupy,
yet never be contained within;

your memories all live in me,
nothing is lost,
nothing ever can be lost,

my love is uncontainably uncontainable,
my capacity infinite,
you are, as I am.'

Motif for Dave Watson, a pilgrim

In open looping circles high above the well-walked road,
and strung on wires taut between the tensions that we hold,
or roosting under eaves of quiet reflection;

Throughout the landscapes of your life
the swallows have collected up the soil,
all your roots and groundedness,
their little beaks arrange and mould
the soft geographies of soul,
the tides of coloured mud in every nest you've known.

And in the end there is one swallow, just
one nest
one
everlasting twitter, trill,
familiar friendly buzzing jizz.

From gathering mud in puddles on a dusty Bulawayo road,
to high migrating signatures across a London sky,
the swallow, and the soul, always turn home.

In-between

There is an archway,
after night has ended and
before today begins,
a vast hazed threshold.

There,
our dreams are
still alert,
and as sleep's
layered cloud
evaporates
they slip back

through daylight's
rigid scaffolding of
ordered thought

to veiled thrones in grey pavilions,
flags flapping
in an unseen wind.

And in that unknowing in-betweenness,
some quick part of all of us,
of you, of me,
of something greater,
is truly
awake.

Soup god

I created a constellation at lunch today,
ground black pepper paint on cream-of-butternut canvas.

One swirl with the spoon
and an entire galaxy is rearranged.

Something - capriciousness? affection?
coursed through the air,
a drift of power,
I could get a taste for this.

Praise Dance

Dance is the voice of the body,
the weaving of river and bone,
finding your place in the space of the world,
and making your body His home.

It's a passion of shifting and shaping,
a lifting of hearts with your moves,
a turn of a hand and the swish of a swirl,
the shapes in your soul are the tools.

And caught in the Light we are turning,
our soul-bodies longing for more,
always this is deeper than privilege,
letting Grace be revealed on the floor.

Collection

To write a poem,
simply drift
the soft sail of
your imagination
out into
the swelling breeze,
and
listen.

Writer's block reprieved

How sweet to live here,
however temporarily,
on the fiery edge of
the known world,
where words coalesce
into new meaning,
and cacophonies of mundane jargon
become stairways
to transcendence.

Mountain meditations

Look up

A line of mountains
cutting deep and clean across
this introspection

A poet to the Mountain comes

he brings a question,
stone waves break
upon the shore
of this imagination.

Invitation

We're far away,
and all our poems have already been completed,

but come back,

closer,
until all you know is the impenetrable gravity
of mountains blotting out the sky;

Here, a stream
skips down
spreads out
across an open undulating shelf of rock,
a thousand jostling liquid tongues lick on at every sandstone grain;

Up there, impossible cliffs,
mansions for cloud gods,
the penetrating weight of silent and enormous stone;

Around, the quiet cool ascendancy of mists,
a bridge of rain;

And, somewhere in the still bright river,
your name is being written on a stone.